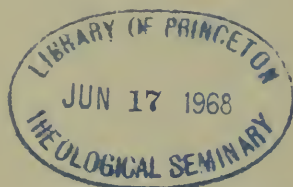


Milton S. Terry

The Miraculous Birth of
Jesus Christ.

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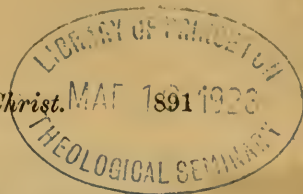


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The Miraculous Birth of Jesus Christ. MAY 1891 1923

Wilton S. Terry



ART. IV.—THE MIRACULOUS BIRTH OF JESUS CHRIST.

THE Apostles' Creed, which most of us have been accustomed from childhood to repeat, and which all the Churches acknowledge as most ancient and worthy of some place in their public service, declares that Jesus Christ "was conceived by the Holy Ghost" and "born of the Virgin Mary." This confession has its scriptural basis in Matt. i, 20, and Luke i, 35, and has commanded a prominent place in the faith of Christendom. But in quite modern times the historical character of the first two chapters of Matthew and of Luke has been widely questioned, and the credibility of the miraculous birth of our Lord has been accordingly denied. Were such denial made by a class of ignorant skeptics and scoffers, or by men known to be unfriendly to the Christian religion, it would not be worthy of serious attention. But when such a man as H. A. W. Meyer, probably the most distinguished and influential New Testament commentator of the last generation, maintains that these chapters of Matthew and Luke are legendary; when the most famous leaders of the school of Ritschl in Germany would fain remove from the Apostles' Creed the statement cited above; and when a theologian so devout and conservative as the late Dr. Beyschlag, of Halle, finds no sure ground for belief in the New Testament record of the miraculous conception, one may reasonably pause and try to weigh without passion or prejudice the reasons which have led so many able divines to question the validity of this common belief of the Christian world.

We need not wonder, however, that the personality of Jesus Christ should command persistent scrutiny, nor is it strange that the gospel records which describe the remarkable beginning and end of his earthly career should invite perpetual study and criticism. Speaking after the manner of men, it must be acknowledged that the supernatural conception of Jesus and his resurrection and ascension into heaven seem so exceptionally miraculous as to invite distrust. But the miraculous conception has been more strenuously questioned than

the resurrection; for while all the New Testament writers acknowledge the resurrection of Jesus, only the gospels of Matthew and Luke record the supernatural birth. These facts are entitled to respectful consideration, but we may not assume that a question of this kind is to be settled by the mere number of witnesses in the case, nor can we allow any *a priori* assumption of the impossibility of miracle to affect the critical procedure.

It is easy for some to dismiss this question by the short method of authoritative dogmatism. Others have no patience with the details of critical inquiry. Multitudes of our people do not care to think at all. There are many, however, who in a matter of this profound and serious character wish for a broad and candid presentation. They do not doubt the sincerity of the men who deny the miraculous conception, but would like to see a fair and comprehensive statement of both sides of the controversy. One may also venture to submit that, even if the historicity of the first chapters of Matthew and Luke be as a whole open to suspicion, the miraculous conception may still be shown to be credible. Our aim in this article is first to state the reasons usually alleged for doubting the historical trustworthiness of the narratives in Matthew and Luke, and to offset them by such replies and other considerations as are entitled to equal attention. In this part of the discussion we study to abstain from anything which might be construed as partisan pleading, or as unwillingness to allow the full force of the opposite position. We shall then proceed to adduce the strong reasons outside the records of the miraculous birth which go to confirm the credibility of those narratives and to establish the faith and tradition of the Christian centuries.

1. The silence of Mark, Paul, and John touching the miraculous birth is construed to discredit the narratives of Luke and Matthew; for while the argument from silence has little weight in general, it may well appear strange that Paul, had he known of the miraculous birth of Jesus, should have nowhere made allusion to the remarkable fact. Still more strange and difficult to account for is the fact that the disciple who took the mother of Jesus to his own home after the cru-

cifixion (John xix, 27) has not a word to say about the supernatural conception. To this it may be answered that as Mark's narrative says nothing about Jesus before his baptism, its silence on any matter previous to that event has no value whatever in this argument. Moreover, from its secret and exceptional character, the miraculous conception could not well be employed by a writer like Paul either among Jews or Christians for apologetic or for dogmatic purposes. It may also be affirmed that the silence of the fourth gospel is a tacit confirmation of the earlier narratives of Matthew and Luke rather than the contrary; for the author was in a position to know and correct the falsity of such remarkable reports of Jesus's coming in the flesh, if they were indeed false.

2. The first two chapters of Matthew and Luke have seemed to many, on close critical inspection, to embody a later stratum of tradition than the main portions of these same gospels. The poetic utterances of Mary (Luke i, 46-55) and of Zacharias (i, 67-79), and the language of Mary and Elisabeth in i, 34, 38, 43, possess the style of legend and of later composition. On the other hand, it may be deemed sufficient to reply that the narratives in these early chapters of Matthew and Luke are indeed the embellished compositions of writers who employed the analogous form and language of Old Testament Scriptures in giving a vivid word-picture of the marvelous events which as actual facts had been sacredly cherished among the few to whom they were known. The form of the narrative and the prophetic songs may be regarded as the elaborated compositions of a later time without disparaging the main facts of the record.

3. Noteworthy differences between the narratives of Matthew and Luke beget suspicion of the credibility of both. In Matthew all the revelations come to Joseph in dreams; but in Luke they are made by announcement to Mary. In reading Matt. ii, 22, 23, no one would imagine that Nazareth had been the early home of Joseph and Mary; but Luke tells us how the birth of Jesus occurred somewhat unexpectedly at Bethlehem (ii, 4-6), and he speaks of the return of his parents into Galilee, to their own city Nazareth (verse 39) without any apparent knowledge of a journey to Egypt and a sojourn

there, as narrated in Matthew's second chapter. Over against these allegations it may be quite sufficient to remark that the differences between Matthew and Luke do not involve any real contradiction or inconsistency. In fact, they supplement each other, and may be put forward rather as evidences of the fullness of the early traditions, from which each evangelist selected only that which best suited the scope and plan of his treatise. In the course of events so remarkable, both Mary and Joseph needed the assurances of repeated revelations.

4. The genealogies of Matthew and Luke, both being a tracing of the line of Joseph, seem to assume from first to last that he was the father of the child Jesus. The parenthetic "as was supposed," in Luke iii, 23, looks like an interpolation, and the words "his parents," "father and mother," "thy father and I" (Luke ii, 27, 33, 41, 43, 48) imply a real relationship. To this it is answered that there was a very real and proper relationship which in common custom and discourse warranted the language here cited. The parenthetic clause is justified and accredited by the entire narrative of the two preceding chapters of Luke. Surely, an adopted child may call his foster parents father and mother; with equal and with even greater propriety might these words have been used in the passages referred to without determining anything as to the real facts of the birth of Jesus and his relation to Joseph.

5. His neighbors seem to know nothing of Jesus' supernatural birth, but they speak of him as "the carpenter's son," and of "his brethren, James, and Joseph, and Simon, and Judas, and his sisters." They ask, "Is not this Jesus the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?" (Matt. xiii, 55; Mark vi, 3; Luke iv, 22; John vi, 42.) But it is not to be thus quietly assumed that the neighbors must know a family secret as holy and peculiar as this. The mother of Jesus kept these things as a sacred treasure in her heart (Luke ii, 51). The time for making them known appropriately followed other evidences of his heavenly origin.

6. But his own brethren and most intimate friends do not seem to have known of his supernatural birth. It is said in Mark iii, 21, that his friends thought him beside himself, and

in John vii, 5, that his brethren did not believe on him. This objection may be met substantially as the preceding. If these were older brethren, as some suppose, children of Joseph by a former marriage, there is no sufficient reason to suppose that the holy secret would have been imparted to them. None of them may have been old enough to remember even remarkable occurrences connected with the birth of Jesus, and they would probably have been left with friends in Nazareth when Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem. But if they were younger brethren, and had even been told something about the remarkable events of the birth of their mother's firstborn son, the lapse of twenty or twenty-five years would have largely removed the impression of it from their thoughts.

7. It is deemed inexplicably strange that in setting forth the facts and claims of Jesus's life no appeal, no reference even, is made in the Acts or in the apostolical epistles to the fact of the supernatural conception and virgin birth. To which it is proper to reply that we are not in a position to judge what was the wise and expedient use to make of such a fact in the apostolic writings. Is it not rather obvious that a miracle of supernatural birth, though well known and accepted among the first disciples, was not a proper subject for public proclamation in the first outgoings of the Gospel? The claims of Jesus to the homage of mankind were first to be set forth on other grounds.

8. The tendency of tradition to glorify the birth and infancy of great men is well known, and the ideals of supernatural intervention associated in biblical history with the birth of Isaac, Samson, Samuel, and John the Baptist are of similar character. This tendency went on in the case of Jesus to the production of all the marvelous stories which are found in the apocryphal gospels; and dogmatic presuppositions led on to the maintenance of the perpetual virginity of Mary, and finally of the immaculate conception of the virgin "mother of God," and all related and consequent Mariolatry. The tendency here mentioned is readily conceded; but it does not follow that we must therefore reject or deem incredible all reports of remarkable signs attending the birth of those whose coming into the world was destined to change the course

of human affairs. The accretions of later legend, dogma, and superstition touching the Virgin Mary do not necessarily discredit the biblical narratives, but point back rather to some sure foundation of fact.* The observance of the law of purification, as recorded in Luke ii, 22, is in notable contrast with the tendency of thought which developed the dogma of the immaculate conception of Mary. How could a mere ideal legend of the supernatural conception and birth of a holy child, begotten of the overshadowing power of the Most High, have allied itself to the rites of purification? Must not such a holy conception and birth have sanctified the virgin mother rather than have rendered her unclean?†

The foregoing reasons for doubting the historical trustworthiness of the narratives of Jesus' supernatural birth are thus shown to be of a negative character, and may be fairly offset in detail by such considerations as we have presented. Not one of these objections when taken separately, nor all of them when put together, would be sufficient in their nature to set aside a well-attested fact of history. At the same time it may be fairly claimed that an unbiased mind, bent upon a purely historical investigation, would naturally feel that the remarkable nature of the subject-matter, the large proportion of dreams and visions and poetry embodied in the chapters in question, and the lack of corresponding testimony in other parts of the New Testament, expose the historicity of the miraculous conception to very serious suspicion. Certain it is that nowhere in the New Testament is this subject of the miraculous birth put forth as an article of faith. That Jesus Christ was manifested in the flesh (1 Tim. iii, 16; 1 John iv,

* To perceive what grotesquely fictitious stories real legend may weave around an historical character, the most superficial reader has only to peruse the apocryphal Protevangelium of James, the Gospel of the Pseudo-Matthew, the Gospel of the Nativity of Mary, the Gospel of the Infancy of the Saviour, the Gospel of Thomas, and the History of Joseph the Carpenter, to find a tone and range of thought unworthy to be compared with the sober simplicity and devout reserve which are so noticeable in the narratives of Matthew and Luke. So, too, the stories of the miraculous birth of Buddha appear absurd and puerile in comparison with our gospel narratives of the birth of Jesus.

† There was certainly nothing in Judaism or Hebrew tradition, which held marriage and the legitimate begetting of children in highest honor, to favor, much less to originate, a fictitious legend about the birth of Jesus; and the supposition that such a legend first started among Gentile Christians, found favor with Jewish Christians, and obtained the credence of such early writers as the compilers of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, is hardly thinkable.

2; 2 John 7) was maintained as fact and fundamental doctrine, but such a statement does not necessarily mean supernatural conception in the womb of a virgin. To maintain therefore the credibility of the miraculous birth it would seem necessary to do something more than offset the aforementioned objections of criticism by pointing out that the objections are in themselves negative and inconclusive. For while the critical reasons for doubt cannot of themselves disprove the alleged fact, the answers to these reasons are not of themselves adequate to establish the fact. The real question here at issue is not one of possibility but of fact, and in order to make out a convincing argument the documentary testimony must be supplemented by adducing other kinds of evidence, and by proving the person and work of Jesus to be so transcendent as to warrant the presumption of an extraordinary beginning and end of his career. If it be true that Jesus Christ stands apart from all other men in an order by himself, and that God was in him as in no other man that has been or shall be, it may be seen that his supernatural birth is but a natural and fitting part of one supreme manifestation of God in a human personality. And if this transcendent superiority of Jesus is a demonstrable fact, it cannot be fairly objected to the presentation of such a fact, as tending to confirm the record of his exceptional birth, that we resort to a use of dogma in support of a question of fact; for it is not dogma but a demonstrable fact which is thus put forward to show the probability of other alleged facts.

1. The first correlative fact to be put forward as in keeping with the supernatural birth is the resurrection of Jesus as witnessed by those who testified that they "did eat and drink with him after he rose from the dead" (Acts x, 41). This fact is generally supposed to be better attested than the record of the miraculous conception, for we read it in all four of the canonical gospels and in the epistles of Paul, not to speak of its mention in other New Testament writings. Paul was intimately acquainted with Peter, having spent fifteen days with him at one time in Jerusalem (Gal. i, 18). He declares that the risen Christ was seen by Peter, and James, and the twelve, and also by more than five hundred at one time, the greater

part of whom were living in his day (1 Cor. xv, 5-7). His own vision of the living Jesus confirmed all this testimony in his own soul. These statements of Paul are reasonably accepted as resting upon the testimony of trustworthy eye-witnesses, but substantially the same facts are recorded in the last chapters of Matthew and Luke. Even though these gospels were written fifty or sixty years after the death of Jesus, the writers were in a position to "trace the course of all things accurately from the first" (Luke i, 3), and to draw up their narratives from the testimony of eyewitnesses. An unbiased critic may accordingly aver that it is quite arbitrary and notably inconsistent to accept as credibly historical the content of the last chapters of Luke and Matthew, which record the supernatural resurrection, and reject the first chapters of these same gospels, which record the supernatural birth. To be thoroughly consistent one must needs either accept or reject all these narratives of the supernatural, for they are all equally marvelous. And with these narratives must go also the testimony of Paul and all the other New Testament writers who affirm the resurrection of our Lord.

2. The ascension of Christ to the right hand of God is another correlative fact which by parity of reasoning must stand or fall with the supernatural birth and the resurrection. Luke is the main witness to the visibility of the ascension. He states that after various appearances to his disciples subsequent to his resurrection, "it came to pass, while he blessed them, he parted from them," and most ancient authorities add, "he was carried up into heaven" (Luke xxiv, 51); but the last clause is wanting in a number of ancient manuscripts. In Acts i, 9, it is plainly declared that "as they were looking, he was taken up, and a cloud received him out of their sight." The appendix to Mark's gospel says that "the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken unto them, was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God." John xx, 17, represents the risen Lord as saying to Mary Magdalene, "I ascend unto my Father and your Father, and my God and your God." In the preaching of Peter in Acts ii, 32-34, it is asserted that Jesus ascended into the heavens, God having raised him from the dead and exalted him by his right hand. Paul declares in Rom. viii, 34,

that Christ Jesus was raised from the dead and is at the right hand of God. It is written in Eph. iv, 10, that Christ "ascended far above all the heavens," and in Heb. iv, 14; vii, 26; viii, 1, that he "has passed through the heavens," "was made higher than the heavens," and "sat down on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens." These and still other similar statements place the ascension into heaven on as creditable a basis historically as the resurrection; for while Luke alone records that the disciples were looking on when Jesus was parted from them and taken up, the whole New Testament is a unit in affirming his ascension into heaven and his sitting at the right hand of God. If now the miraculous entrance into the world is denied on the ground of its paradoxical and legendary character, we see not how the miraculous exit of Jesus from the world can be consistently maintained.

3. Nor can we consistently stop with the rejection of the miracles of the resurrection and the ascension. All the narratives of miraculous works performed by Jesus, as recorded in the four gospels and reported in apostolical tradition, must go along with the reports of the greater wonders of the supernatural birth and the resurrection. We have detailed accounts of his healing the sick with a word of command, and in the same miraculous manner curing the lame, and withered, and deaf, and dumb, and paralytic, and lunatics, and demoniacs, giving sight to the blind, walking on the sea, stilling the tempest, and raising the dead to life. According to the earliest traceable oral tradition and the oldest written records, the public ministry of our Lord seems to have teemed with miracles. We are not able to divorce his mighty works from his mighty teaching. And it is utterly futile to reject a reported miracle because we find it recorded in one gospel only. We should on the same ground reject the parables of the tares, the good Samaritan, and the prodigal son.

4. Furthermore, the totality of superior qualities, which all Christendom has by a common consent acknowledged in Jesus Christ, cannot be altogether ignored in a fair and full discussion of the supernatural birth. Is it then a fact that as a man among men Jesus was so separate from sinners as to be without sin, holy, guileless, tempted like other men, but never

yielding to an evil suggestion, possessed of all moral and spiritual excellence, matchless in the wisdom and power of his teaching, universal in his sympathies, though for definite reasons confining his ministry almost entirely to his own Jewish people, fulfilling in the deepest sense the law and the prophets, and introducing the religion of the kingdom of heaven on earth which from the first immeasurably transcended all the existing religious systems of the world—is all this true as a matter of fact? The great majority of the Christian people of the world to-day believe it is true, and the fact is also conceded by not a few who do not confess themselves Christians. There is perhaps no question which is more commanding and more perplexing to philosophical minds of a religious but skeptical cast than that of the person of the historic Christ. We submit that this commanding personality, so profoundly worshipful in all his moral perfections, holds conspicuous and consistent correlation with the alleged fact of the supernatural birth.

We need not complicate this discussion with the question of the preexistence of Christ, for that subject may be considered more a matter of doctrine than of fact.* The foregoing argument is submitted as fairly leading to the conclusion that a rejection of the tradition of the miraculous birth of Jesus carries with it logically and exegetically a like rejection of all that has hitherto been regarded as truly miraculous in the person and work of Jesus Christ. But there are several distinguishable positions which may be stated with brief comment, as follows:

1. There are those who deny the supernatural altogether. With them miracles are essentially impossible in either the natural or the moral order of the world. The miraculous con-

* A matter which some would urge as of no little importance in its bearing on the transcendent personality of Jesus is the witness derived from Old Testament prophecy. Apart from all disputed interpretations of particular passages, there remains the commanding fact, to be duly reckoned with, that for some six or seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus the Messianic hope had been growing in the hearts of the Israelitish people, and had reached its highest degree of pious expectation at the time our Lord appeared. But as a Messianic hope it has no necessary connection with the question of the supernatural birth of the Messiah. Only that interpretation of Isa. vii, 14, and Matt. i, 22, 23, which is now generally discarded as exegetically unsound can construct a relevant argument for the miraculous conception on this ground.

ception can of course find no acceptance with this class of thinkers, and they are thoroughly consistent in rejecting the reports and traditions of all other alleged miracles. But when anyone of this class takes in hand to explain the commanding mystery of the person of Christ, the result is of a most unsatisfactory character. The intangible residuum which is left after eliminating from the Jesus of history all that savors of the supernatural seems so utterly inadequate to account for his personal influence over the men of his time and for the facts which have demonstrably followed as direct results of his appearance in the world, that few if any have been thoroughly satisfied with the various naturalistic hypotheses proposed to explain the earliest records of Christianity.

2. There are others who are persuaded that Jesus must have performed many marvelous works, for they affirm that nothing less than this admission can treat the New Testament records with rational fairness. Critics of this class pursue an eclectic course, and sometimes presume to say what particular miracles may, and what may not, have been actually wrought by Jesus. Most of the cases of remarkable healing are accepted as credible; the casting out of demons is regarded as a tactful accommodation to the superstition of the times, and along with it a truly skillful treatment of certain cases of disordered mental action, resulting in real "mind cure." The deaf, the dumb, and the blind may also have been cured by the superior wisdom and power of the wonderful man who was at once teacher, prophet, and physician. But such miracles as walking on the water are regarded as instances of illusion, and the raising of Lazarus, and the son of the widow of Nain, and Jairus's daughter are rejected as incredible. The position of this class of thinkers, however, seems less satisfactory than that of those who consistently deny the reality of all alleged miracles. These eclectic critics leave us all at sea, and each reader of the records becomes a law unto himself.

3. But there are some who acknowledge the truly supernatural in Jesus, and admit the great miracles attributed to him in the gospels, including his resurrection from the dead, but deny the credibility of the miraculous conception. It is no doubt the right of the critical mind to discriminate in questions of this

magnitude. One may consistently accept the miraculous, and yet hesitate to accept a tradition so strange and exceptional, so paradoxical, so bizarre, as the miraculous conception and virgin birth of even the most adorable character known to human history. In view of all the considerations noticed in the present article, the Churches do well to refrain from erecting this unquestioned fact into a distinctive and essential article of faith. But we may well question the consistency of that position which freely accepts all else that is miraculous in the life and work of Christ and yet stumbles over the miraculous beginning of his incarnation.

4. There remains what seems to us the only self-consistent position in a rational explanation of all the facts which enter into this discussion, namely, that the holy child Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, and is divinely entitled to be called "the only begotten Son of God." He was according to Paul the second and last Adam, the man from heaven, the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, the beginning (*ἀρχή*), the firstborn from the dead, the Alpha and the Omega of John's "Revelation of Jesus Christ." If we believe that life in the cosmos originated, not in nonliving matter, but in a principle of life imparted immediately from the living God, so also we believe the human life of the immaculate Son of God was supernaturally begotten of the same Source of all life and being. And even if one should concede that the historicity of the first chapters of Matthew and Luke is open to some measure of reasonable doubt, such a concession would not necessarily invalidate the fact of the miraculous birth of Jesus Christ. That transcendent fact finds a mighty support on other grounds. And we are compelled, by the force of all the evidence adduced, to accept this adorable mystery of Him who, according to one of the very earliest confessions of faith,

Was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, received up in glory.

Milton S. Terry

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